



## Should Neck Reining Be Called “Bodying”?

### Aids, Cues, or Both in Sync?

Growing up in Bandera, Cowboy Capital of the World, it’s fitting that my earliest memories of television are filled with images of cowboy heroes, and bandits heading for the hills with mounted posses in hot pursuit. In the heyday of Roy Rogers and John Wayne, and the last hurrah of the B-grade Western movie, I would watch anything with horses in it. (I still will!) I loved these shows, their often predictable plots or sometimes less than stellar acting notwithstanding. Just one thing bothered me. Whenever the bad guys took off for the hideout, or the hero made a dramatic exit from a scene, their horses struggled to make that quick turn; their necks twisted awkwardly, noses thrown away from the direction they were being asked to turn, their mouths agape in obvious



Photo 1

discomfort. “Take-offs” were stilted and slow instead of fast and smooth as they were intended to be. The harder the riders yanked on their reins, the more their horses stumbled and struggled to regain balance. Even a 4 year old’s eyes could see that something wasn’t working here, although I wasn’t sure why.

Fast forward to the present. (Let’s don’t do the math!). I’m back in Bandera, on our ranch, mounting up a new group of guests following our pre-trail-ride tutorial, when I hear an all-too-frequently asked question; “Does this horse neck rein?” The hair stands up on the back of my neck, as those early TV images of wide-eyed, confused horses flash through my mind. “Neck reining should be called bodying”, I answer, then go on to explain what I could not as a child. “A neck rein is only a cue, not a true aid from the rider to his horse.”

Aids are basic, direct signals, applied in varying degrees and combinations by the rider’s legs, hands via the reins, seat, posture, and breath, in order to set the horse up for a specific movement, and to support the horse through it. Aids, not cues, are used FIRST in training a horse, because they ask the horse to move all or part of its body away from pressure in a way that is straight-forward and relatively easy for the horse to understand and respond to.

Cues, on the other hand, are brief, distinct signals that are coupled with and/ or derived from the aids in the training process. As the horse’s ability to bend and balance develops, the aids can become more subtle, and the rider can rely more upon cues to execute a skill or maneuver. (This is possible because the horse still associates the cue with the formerly stronger aids with which it has been coupled in the horse’s previous training.) Cues are more commonly used in Western disciplines than in English ones.

An advanced horse and horseman can do highly skilled maneuvers using primarily cues, with very subtle aids, only if: 1) The rider use his or her body in a way that balances, (aids), the horse, and 2) The appropriate aids, however subtle, are still coupled with the cue.

Furthermore, when a maneuver needs refinement, the aids must be revisited, and possibly strengthened. Often, exaggerating, only a cue, just makes things worse.

This was the case with our mis-lead TV Western riders when they over-applied the neck rein. A rein, laid on the outside of your horse’s neck WILL NOT, by itself, place your horse’s head, neck, or body in a balanced position to prepare for a turn, or to support that position through the turn. But, if the other aids with which it is coupled in training are properly applied at the same time as the neck rein cue, a nicely balanced bending turn or turn on the haunches can be achieved.

Let’s take a forward, bending turn as an example. Photo 1 shows me and Molly properly executing a bending turn to the right. Yes, I’ve applied the left rein to the side of her neck, but it’s not this rein alone, that’s creating the even bend to the right, from Molly’s ears to her tail, and her well-balanced, upright position. I’m also



Photo 2

rotating my level shoulders slightly right, leaving my left leg slightly behind the girth, while my right leg stays a bit more forward on Molly’s body. Slight pressure from my left leg supports her haunches, while slight pressure from my right leg keeps her body upright, and her rib cage soft and in line with the bending turn to the right that we’ve created. (Like I say, “neck reining” should be called “bodying”.) Molly is able to collect, bend, and balance with very subtle aids applied in sync with the neck rein, because she associates the neck rein cue with the stronger aids used in her former training.

Conversely, Photo 2 shows what happens when I do not apply the proper subtle aids in sync with the neck rein cue. My shoulders aren’t properly turned, and my leg position is sloppy. Molly’s neck and body are stiffening, and her weight is falling to the inside. I’ve exaggerated the neck rein instead of my aids in an attempt to fix things, but only made things worse. Poor Molly eventually has to slow down and stop just to regain her balance. It would have worked better if I had corrected and strengthened my aids, and maybe reached down the right rein and squeezed it lightly in order to tuck her jaw toward her shoulder, thereby collecting and re-balancing her.

A forward, bending turn is just one example of how important it is to understand not just the cues, but the proper position and aids used to execute a maneuver properly. Next month, we’ll continue our discussion of aids and cues with a look at turns on the haunches, stops, and what it means to ride “straight up in the bridle”. Till then, journey onward and enjoy the ride!

*Dianne Lindig, 2008 Horseback Magazine Instructor of the Year, can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. [www.hillcountryequestlodge.com](http://www.hillcountryequestlodge.com), or (830) 796-7950.*

*Photos by Emily Thomas*

